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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 MANILA 002474

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STATE FOR EAP/MTS
USPACOM ALSO FOR J5
SECDEF/OSD/ISA/AP TOOLAN/REDMAN
JOINT STAFF/J5 (WILKES/ROBINSON/COLEMAN)

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TAGS: PTER MOPS PINS RP

SUBJECT: GOVERNMENT DELAYS PUNITIVE ACTION ON BASILAN

REF: A. MANILA 2428

1B. MANILA 2369

1C. MANILA 2358

1D. MANILA 2344

Classified By: Ambassador Kristie A. Kenney
for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

11. (C) Summary. Senior government officials say they will delay punitive military operations against the suspected perpetrators of the July 10 beheadings of ten Philippine Marines in Tijo-Tipo, Basilan. We have urged restraint and protection of the peace process to senior government and Moro Islamic Liberation Front officials, following a series of inflammatory statements from both sides. Ambassador is in contact with like-minded ambassadors from Japan, Australia, Canada, and the United Kingdom to urge restraint and protect our investments in peace and development. We are also engaging government stakeholders such as the Secretary of Agriculture and head of the National Economic Development Authority. Local stakeholders in the peace process are also urging restraint and an independent investigation of the events on Basilan. We understand that National Security Advisor Gonzales and Presidential Advisor on the Peace Process Dureza have agreed that military operations would be delayed, at least until July 27, when there may be further meetings. End Summary.

Planned Military Action

12. (C) Armed Forces of the Philippines (AFP) Chief of Staff General Hermogenes Esperon, National Security Advisor/Acting National Defense Secretary Norberto Gonzales, and Presidential Advisor on the Peace Process Jesus Dureza briefed the foreign diplomatic corps July 20 on the impending military operations against the suspected perpetrators of the July 10 beheadings of ten Philippine Marines in Tijo-Tipo, Basilan. General Esperon said "punitive police actions" would commence after an ultimatum to the Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF) to surrender the perpetrators ended on July 22. To preserve the peace process, Secretary Dureza stressed that only the perpetrators of the beheadings would be targeted under "limited objective operations" and not the MILF as an organization. The deputy commander of Western Mindanao Commander, Brigadier General Juancho Sabban, will command the new task force, which has been named Task Force Meteor.

Troops Deployed for "Surgical" Operations

¶13. (C) Defense Undersecretary Ricardo Blancaflor confirmed to poloff on July 22 that three Marine battalions deployed on Basilan were ready to begin "surgical" operations against the perpetrators of the July 10 beheadings. Blancaflor noted that Defense Undersecretary Tony Santos had been in Basilan since July 21 to provide oversight to the operations, which were planned to last one week, but could last as long as one month. Blancaflor added that he and Secretary Dureza would engage MILF leaders to avoid the spread of potential violence in Basilan to central Mindanao.

Stakeholders in Peace Process React

¶14. (C) Ambassador is in contact with like-minded ambassadors from Japan, Australia, Canada, and the United Kingdom to coordinate messages of restraint and protection of the peace process. We are also engaging Secretary of Agriculture Yap and National Economic Development Authority Director Neri. DCM spoke with MILF Vice Chairman for Political Affairs Jafaar stressing the need to lower the rhetoric and prevent any spill-over of violence into central Mindanao. Jafaar recognized the importance of stopping the conflict from spreading. DCM discussed the situation with Government Peace Panel Chairman Garcia, who said he had personally urged AFP Chief of Staff Esperon and Executive Secretary Ermita to delay military action until after an independent investigation could be completed.

¶15. (C) According to Government Peace Negotiations Panel

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Executive Director Ryan Sullivan, numerous stakeholders in the peace process, including foreign diplomats, religious leaders, non-governmental organizations, and international donors, are urging the government to allow time for peace process mechanisms to guide an appropriate course of action on Basilan. In a July 22 letter to Peace Panel Chairman Garcia, Japanese Ambassador Yamazaki expressed "grave concern" over impending military operations that could derail the MILF peace talks. Lead convenors of such peace advocacy groups as the Mindanao Peace Caucus, Consortium of Bangsamoro Civil Society, and the Mindanao PeaceWeavers are requesting an impartial and independent investigation of the beheadings in accordance with the primacy of the peace process.

Joint Resolution Issued

¶16. (C) Sullivan said Government Committee on the Cessation of Hostilities (CCCH) Chairman Brigadier General Gurrea and his counterpart, MILF/CCCH Chairman Von Al Haq, signed a joint resolution on July 22 calling for "maximum restraint" by the Government and MILF, and the creation of a Joint Fact-Finding Committee to determine the cause of the Basilan incident. Gurrea and Von Al Haq also recommended the deployment of a Mobile Joint Monitoring Assistance Team to Basilan to prevent a further outbreak of violence.

¶17. (C) Gurrea and Von Al Haq traveled to Basilan July 23 to begin their fact-finding mission. Sullivan said International Monitoring Team members would support the Joint Committee's investigation in an advisory capacity from Zamboanga City. Separately, Bantay Ceasefire representatives are expected to begin an independent investigation of the Basilan incident.

Military Operation Delayed

¶8. (C) Sullivan noted that a July 22 meeting with Cotabato City Archbishop Orlando Quevado encouraged NSC Advisor/Acting Defense Secretary Gonzales and Secretary Dureza to delay Philippine military operations on Basilan until July 27. MILF Peace Panel member Michael Mastura expressed hope that the Archbishop's intervention would "cool things down" so that the Joint Committee's investigation could proceed.

Comment

¶9. (C) The Philippine government understandably wants to bring the perpetrators of the July 10 beheadings to justice. There is no guarantee that these operations will not trigger a renewed round of fighting and even spill over into central Mindanao where some hard line MILF elements are itching for a fight. We will continue to work with all sides to urge restraint.

KENNEY